



THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

1775 MASSACHUSETTS AVENUE, N.W. WASHINGTON, D.C. 20036-2188
TELEPHONE: 202/797-6011 FAX: 202/797-6003

Foreign Policy Studies Program
jsteinbruner@brook.edu

Revised, July 19, 1995

To: Harold Smith
From: John Steinbruner
Re: The BW Problem

In an effort to be helpful, I would like to summarize for you the perspective on the biological weapons situation that we discussed last Friday.

The core argument is that the United States will have to establish systematic collaboration with the organizations and individuals that were directly involved in the Soviet Union's biological weapons program in order to be confident that the Russian government has successfully terminated the offensive features of that program. I believe that such collaboration is desirable, even urgent for more general reasons and that it is feasible. If an initiative could be established in the United States, it is very likely to succeed in Russia.

The Nature of the Problem

I understand that there is a prevailing conviction within the United States government that clandestine and illegal activities associated with the offensive use of biological agents continue in Russia and that the authoritative figures of the Russian government who have been consulted about the problem are either unaware of this activity, unable to stop it, or cynically willing to prevaricate about it. I accept that as a matter of practical politics the burden of proof falls on anyone attempting to overturn this conviction. When evidence is ambiguous, of course, whoever carries the burden of proof usually loses any argument.

Given this situation I believe it is quite important to introduce some specific questions, most notably: why might suspicious BW activities be continuing? What would constitute decisive termination? How would definitive evidence of termination be obtained?

The idea that offensive BW activities are continuing in a systematic effort to implement the original concept of offensive operations is quite an extreme proposition, and I believe that anyone advancing that form of the argument should carry the burden of proof. The Russian Army clearly does not have the overall offensive capability that was once attributed to Soviet forces. The Russian forces are smaller and budgets have been cut to levels that are not adequate to sustain the smaller forces. In the internal resource allocation battles associated with this process, there is no good reason for the BW effort to have been protected. BW agents are not competitive with other types of weapons for basic military missions, and one would expect them to be jettisoned under budget pressures. That corresponds to the statements of those known to have

been involved in the original program. They say that their budgets have been cut to nominal levels -- less than 5% of their normal operating amounts. Under these conditions the most reasonable presumption is that continuation of the program has to do with preserving the people rather than the military mission they were originally supposed to be serving.

It is fairly evident that those people and their institutions are in desperate circumstances. They are tainted by a nefarious past which cannot be continued but is not easily transcended. They are not commercially viable even in principle. Their expertise has little to do with the major existing health problems, and commercial investors would not be interested in them for immediate economic reasons. Those that might be interested in them are not likely to have legitimate purposes in mind. They are undoubtedly very wary, fearful of their very real legal and economic vulnerability. They need a legitimate purpose and systematic reconstruction, and no one has yet offered that to them.

Under these circumstances what the Russian government appears to mean when they say they have terminated the BW program is simply that they have cut budgets down to personnel maintenance levels and have abandoned the concept of operations that was originally used to organize the program. The more decisive actions of destroying the relevant facilities and reprogramming of the people would cost money. It is unfortunate but not surprising that they have not done that. The less assertive form of termination that they seem to have undertaken still generates evidence of continuing activity as the people and institutions involve struggle to sustain themselves. Definitive evidence of termination would only come with systematic reconstruction for legitimate purposes. It is extremely doubtful that the current Russian government is capable of undertaking such an effort by themselves.

The Outline of A Solution

Decisive, well documented termination of the BW program that the Russian government inherited will require a program of reconstruction, that is, conversion of the individuals involved and their main facilities to legitimate purposes. And that in turn will require a constructive initiative from the international community. In the first instance, undoubtedly, the initiative would have to come from the United States, but the United Kingdom is a potential collaborator.

The natural purpose and basic design of such an initiative is obvious. The individuals and primary institutions that were involved in the Soviet BW effort should be integrated into an international health monitoring and infectious disease prevention network. This development is urgently required for its own sake and provides a solid basis for legitimate collaboration. In the context of such a collaboration the chances are maximized that we can discover what we most need to know about the past; namely, the strains that were developed and their infectious properties.

There are three basic categories of activity associated with the historical BW program that the Russian government has inherited. They are respectively: 1) fundamental research, 2) the development of agents for weapons purposes, and 3) volume production and weaponization of the

developed agents. The first of these activities was done at relatively open research institutions and most of the individuals involved were probably unaware of even the fact and certainly the details of offensive military application. The development of agents explicitly for military application was done at a separate set of research institutions, primarily those organized under Biopreparat. The individuals involved were certainly aware of the basic purposes of their work, but those institutions were not designed to be the primary production facilities. A separate set of facilities integrated into the military directly were constructed for the purpose of large scale production and incorporation into operational weapons.

The Russian institutions involved in fundamental research and in biological agent development are the logical candidates for direct collaboration. As I reported to you, at least some of the critical individuals appear to be desperately eager for such an arrangement. Within the United States, the collaborating institutions would logically include both NIH/CDC and USAMRIID. It would not be a trivial matter to forge such a combination, but the inherent interests are certainly powerful enough to motivate it. The Russian institutions have a genuine scientific and practical contribution to make, especially to our knowledge of the hemorrhagic fevers. Those diseases pose natural and potentially deliberate threats against which we are not currently as well organized as we should aspire to be.

The redirection of individuals involved in weaponization and in preparations for large scale production would undoubtedly have to be done separately from any health monitoring and disease prevention effort. These are basically military officers who need alternative careers and need special assistance in developing them, including some form of political and legal exoneration. The first obvious step would be to get in touch with them and to assess specifically what the problems are.